

## A River People

Just before Hudson's Bay Fort Colvile was established almost 200 years ago in 1825, the Hudson's Bay Company merged with the North West Company. The North West fur trading company had a post near the junction of the Spokane and Little Spokane rivers. When George Simpson, head of the Hudson's Bay Company in North America, visited the area he commanded the newly acquired North West Company fur traders to establish Fort Colvile near the Kettle Falls salmon fishery and leave Spokane House. The mostly French and Indian fur traders at Spokane House were not happy about it. Neither were members of the Spokane Tribe, who had formed strong trading relations with them over the past 11 years.

Wanting to learn more about the Spokan Tribe, (Sp'q'n'i? pronounced Spock-en-ee), I was fortunately invited to attend a talk by Warren Seyler, Spokan Tribe Historian, in Wellpinit. We started the meeting with a prayer. The Spokans had anticipated the arrival of white men from prophecies by Cornelius; much similar to that of the Coeur d'Alene tribes Circling Raven who saw a man arriving wearing a black robe carrying crossed sticks (Jesuit Priest). The difference of the Spokane the new comer was not dressed in a black robe but was carrying talking leaves (bible). The Spokans understood these new people could help them in the future. They did not foresee all the various struggles that those that followed these men of god would bring as those that followed did not follow the black book.

Spokan history can be described as a long series of deceptive treaties, written agreements and broken promises that displaced and dispersed the people from their territory, from each other and from their culture. The presentation included one image that seemed to sum up what they were facing, a painting by John Gast done in 1872 called "American Progress".



It shows a white angel carrying a bible and telegraph wire hovering over settlers and pioneers as they push natives, bison and wildlife from the landscape and replace them with farms, trains and cities. The illustration

depicts what historically was called the “Doctrine of Discovery” this American version was titled Manifest Destiny. *This idea allowed European entities to seize lands inhabited by indigenous peoples under the guise of “discovering new land”.* (Wikipedia).

One of the first things Seyler talked about was how tribal history was passed on by elders talking to younger generations. He noted that not only are facts and traditions passed on in this manner, but also a bond of trust and understanding is established between generations. Warren himself prefers to talk to people directly for this very reason.

He told us that a major cultural difference between Indigenous and European culture is that native culture is based on giving, not taking. As an example he pointed to a typical birthday party where getting gifts is the central activity. On the other hand, a native potlatch is all about the celebrant giving their things away. I thought that was crazy when I heard about it in school. Now I see that giving as a demonstration of confidence that a person can support the group and not be any the less for it. Gold chains and fancy cars don’t make the man, showing the ability to do without does.

He noted that in a familial band, living off the land, everyone relies on each other. The hunters, gatherers, canoe builders, tool makers and home builders all benefit from what each other does. If any of them fails in their responsibility, all lose out.

Historically the Spokane people lived near and from the river. 70% of their diet was fish. Over time, relying on stores and trade for food changed their eating habits to a more unhealthy western diet. They are working to bring back the fish, particularly salmon for their own health and that of the earth around them.

Restoring a culture takes a lot of thought and work. In her book, “Keeping the Lakes’ Way” Reburial and the Re-creation of a Moral World among an Invisible People, Paula Price describes how re-establishing a sacred place in Vallican, BC to re-bury remains of their people has brought the Sinixt (Lakes) people closer together.

I couldn’t help but identify with salmon when thinking about the drive needed to keep a culture. Salmon start out as smolt, living in a small stream in the roots of a river. After swimming thousands of miles down to the ocean and learning to live in that planetary soup, they swim back thousands of miles, to that same stream following the memory of smells and tastes they grew up with to a place where they feel deep down it is safe and right to reproduce, die and meld their bodies back into the ecology.

Our family often watches the PBS show, Finding Your Roots, with Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as moderator. It traces the ancestry of celebrity guests as far back as records and DNA allows. Often those personal stories trace back to horrible chapters of human history: putting Jews in ghettos, bringing black people to the sugar cane fields of Haiti, enslaving Aztec Indians to mine silver... My father’s parents were Catholics who escaped from Sicily. My mother’s were Mormons who fled Wales. In America’s “melting pot”, you find the vast majority have travelled very far from their home streams.

I was lucky enough to visit my grandfather’s home town, Castelbuono, Sicily. Walking down the main street a feeling came over me that this was a place deep in my heart I recognized as home. The welding of place and tradition that Paula Price saw in Vallican for the Sinixt is a rare treasure. Being able to build back their traditions in their own space is reviving the soul of the Spokans. We all have a lot to discover without assuming that our technologies and teachings are the best way to live.